

### Week 3:

#### Pre-Colonial Cultural Locations and Characteristics (Art, Language, Clothing and Courtsy)

This lecture for the week will concentrate on diffusing the notion that civilisation is predominantly Eurocentric i.e. civilisation would have gotten to Nigeria (even if development was slow) even if there was no phase of colonisation.

Early Nigerian history relates to the period of history in Nigeria prior to the common era. Recent archaeological research has shown that people were already living in Nigeria (specifically the Iwo-Eleru) as early as 11,000 BC and perhaps earlier at Ugwuelle-Uturu (Okigwe) in south-eastern Nigeria. Microlithic and ceramic industries were developed by savanna pastoralists from at least the 4th millennium BC and were continued by subsequent agricultural communities. The Efik/Ibibio/Annang Efik, Ibibio, and Annang people of single ancestor of the coastal south-eastern Nigeria are known to have lived in the area several thousands of years before Christ.

Archaeological research, pioneered by Thurstan Shaw and Steve Daniels, has shown that people were already living in south-western Nigeria (specifically Iwo-Eleru) as early as 11,000 BC and perhaps earlier at Ugwuelle-Uturu (Okigwe) in south-eastern Nigeria, where microliths were used. Smelting furnaces at Taruga dating from the 4th century BC provide the oldest evidence of metalworking in archaeology.

The earliest known example of a fossil human skeleton found anywhere in West Africa, which is 13,000 years old, was found at Iwo-Eleru in western Nigeria and attests to the antiquity of habitation in the region.

Microlithic and ceramic industries were also developed by savannah pastoralists from at least the 4th millennium BC and were continued by subsequent agricultural communities. In the south, hunting and gathering gave way to subsistence farming around the same time, relying more on the indigenous yam and oil palm than on the cereals important in the North.

The stone axe heads, imported in great quantities from the north and used in opening the forest for agricultural development, were venerated by the Yoruba descendants of Neolithic pioneers as "thunder bolts" hurled to earth by the gods.

Kainji Dam excavations revealed iron-working by the 2nd century BC. The transition from Neolithic times to the Iron Age apparently was achieved without intermediate bronze production. Others suggest the technology moved west from the Nile Valley, although the Iron Age in the Niger River valley and the forest region appears to predate the introduction of metallurgy in the upper savanna by more than 800 years.

The earliest identified iron-using Nigerian culture is that of the Nok culture that thrived between approximately 900 BC and 200 AD on the Jos Plateau in north-eastern Nigeria. Information is lacking from the first millennium AD following the Nok ascendancy, but by the 2nd millennium AD there was active trade from North Africa through the Sahara to the forest, with the people of the savanna acting as

intermediaries in exchanges of various goods.

## Iron Age

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Nigeria has more than 300 ethnic groups with diverse languages, culture and beliefs, but is predominantly divided into three major ethnic groups, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Historically, there was no Nigeria until the amalgamation in 1914 therefore before then there were empires where villages came under; these are Songhai Empires consisting majorly of the northern states, the Oyo Empire holding the south-west fort and the Benin Empire for the South-east.

Long before 1500 much of modern Nigeria was divided into states identified with contemporary ethnic groups. These early states included the Yoruba kingdoms, the Igbo Kingdom of Nri, the Edo State kingdom of Benin, the Hausa cities, and Nupe. Additionally numerous small states to the west and south of Lake Chad were absorbed or displaced in the course of the expansion of Kanem, which was centered to the northeast of Lake Chad. Bornu, initially the western province of Kanem, became independent in the late 14th century. Other states probably existed but the absence of archaeological data prevents accurate dating. In the southeast, the earliest Igbo state was Nri which emerged in 900 AD. Despite its relatively small size geographically it is considered the cradle of Igbo culture.

The Archaeology of Igbo-Ukwu has been revealed in bronzes dating from the 9th century AD, which were discovered during excavations by Thurstan Shaw and his team in 1959 and 1964 in Igbo-Ukwu, an Igbo town in present-day Nigeria. A total of three sites have been excavated, revealing bronze artifacts along with pottery and thousands of glass beads, materials demonstrating trade with such distant cultures as the Egyptians.

These bronze artifacts had been made by Igbo-Ukwu's ancient residents from local copper and other materials. They have been confirmed as the first people in West Africa to work copper and its alloys, centuries before other cultures.

## **Nok Culture**

The earliest identified Nigerian culture is the Nok culture that thrived between 1500 BC and 200 AD on the Jos Plateau in northeastern Nigeria. Information is lacking from the first millennium BC following the Nok ascendancy, but by the 2nd millennium BC there was active trade from Ancient Egypt via Nubia through the Sahara to the forest with the savanna people acting as intermediaries in exchanges of various goods.

The **Nok culture** appeared in Northern Nigeria around 1000 BC and vanished under unknown circumstances around 300 AD in the region of West Africa. It is thought to have been the product of an ancestral nation that branched to create Benue- Congo peoples such as the Edo, Itir'oma, Igala, Igbo, Nupe and Yoruba.

The Nok culture was considered to be the earliest sub-Saharan producer of life-sized Terracotta. The terracotta figures are hollow, coil built, nearly life-sized human heads and bodies that are depicted with highly stylized features, abundant jewellery, and varied postures.

Little is known of the original function of the pieces, but theories include ancestor portrayal, grave markers, and charms to prevent crop failure, infertility, and illness. Also, based on the dome-shaped bases found on several figures, they could have been used as finials for the roofs of ancient structures.

Iron use, in smelting and forging for tools, appears in Nok culture in Africa at least by 550 BC and possibly earlier. Christopher Ehret has suggested that iron smelting was independently discovered in the region prior to 1000 BC.

The Nok culture was discovered in 1928 on the Jos Plateau during tin mining. In 1943, near the village of Nok, in the center of Nigeria, a new series of clay figurines were discovered by accident while mining tin. A worker had found a head and had taken it back to his home for use as a scarecrow, a role that it filled (successfully) for a year in a yam field. It then drew the attention of the director of the mine who bought it. He brought it to the city of Jos and showed it to the trainee civil administrator, Bernard Fagg, an archaeologist who immediately understood its importance. He asked all of the miners to inform him of all of their discoveries and was able to amass more than 150 pieces.

Afterwards, Bernard and Angela Fagg ordered systematic excavations that revealed many more profitable lucky finds dispersed over a vast area, much larger than the original site. In 1977, the number of terracotta objects discovered in the course of the mining excavation amounted to 153 units, mostly from secondary deposits (the statuettes had been carted by floods near the valleys) situated in dried-up riverbeds in savannahs in Northern and Central Nigeria (the southwestern portion of the Jos Plateau).

The archaeologist Bernard Fagg, in his studies on the Nok culture, identified the Nok culture with central Nigerian groups such as the Ham (Jaba) ethnic group of Southern Kaduna State, based on similarities between some of the cultural practices and dressing of those modern central Nigerian groups and the figures depicted in the Nok art.

## **Songhai Empire**

The Songhai state has existed in one form or another for over a thousand years, if one traces its rulers from the settlement of Gao to Songhai's vassal status under the Mali Empire to its continuation in Niger as the Dendi Kingdom.

The Songhai is thought to have settled at Gao as early as 800 BC, but did not establish the city as their capital until the 11th century, during the reign of Dia Kossou.

Sonni Ali was credited to have founded, established and enriched the empire through his brutality and tyranny, but his successor Askia Mohammed Ture (also known as Askia the Great) is said to have influenced the empire with his Islamic religion through the dominance of the religion to the empire.

At its peak, the Songhai city of Timbuktu became a thriving cultural and commercial centre. Arab, Italian, and Jewish merchants all gathered for trade. A revival of Islamic scholarship also took place at the university in Timbuktu. However, Timbuktu was but one of a myriad of cities throughout the empire. By 1500, the Songhai Empire covered over 14 million square kilometres.

## **Oyo Empire**

Oral history recorded under the Oyo Empire derives the Yoruba as an ethnic group from the population of the older kingdom of Ife-Ife. Archaeologically, the settlement at Ife can be dated to the 4th century B.C.E, with urban structures appearing in the 12th century (the urban phase of Ife before the rise of Oyo, ca. 1100–1600, a significant peak of political centralization in the 12th century) is commonly described as a "golden age" of Ife. The oba or ruler of Ife is referred to as the Ooni of Ife.

## **Oyo and Ife-Ife**

The settlement at Ife appears to have entered this "golden age" with the appearance of urban structures by the 12th century. This seems to be the formative period of the Yoruba people as reflected in oral tradition and due to it, Ife continues to be seen as the "spiritual homeland" of the Yoruba. The city was surpassed by the Oyo Empire as the dominant Yoruba military and political power in the 17th century.

## Benin Empire

The Benin Empire (1440–1897) was a pre-colonial empire; with its capital Benin City now located in Edo state in what is now Nigeria.

The original people and founders of the Benin Empire, the Edo people, were initially ruled by the Ogiso (Kings of the Sky) dynasty who called their land Igodomigodo. The rulers or kings were commonly known as Ogiso. Igodo, the first Ogiso, wielded much influence and gained popularity as a good ruler.

The Oba had become the paramount power within the region. Oba Ewuare, the first *Golden Age* Oba, is credited with turning Benin City into City States from a military fortress built by Ogiso, protected by moats and walls. It was from this bastion that he launched his military campaigns and began the expansion of the kingdom from the Edo-speaking heartlands.

Oba Ewuare was a direct descendant of Eweka I great grandson of Oduduwa, Oni of Ife.

A series of walls marked the incremental growth of the sacred city from 850 AD until its decline in the 16th century. In the 15th century Benin became the greatest city of the empire created by Oba Ewuare. To enclose his palace he commanded the building of Benin's inner wall, a seven-mile (11km) long earthen rampart girded by a moat 50 feet (15m) deep. This was excavated in the early 1960s by Graham Connah. Connah estimated that its construction, if spread out over five dry seasons, would have required a workforce of 1000 laborers working ten hours a day seven days a week. Ewuare also added great thoroughfares and erected nine fortified gateways.

Excavations also uncovered a rural network of earthen walls 4 to 8 thousand miles long that would have taken an estimated 150 million man hours to build and must have taken hundreds of years to build. These were apparently raised to mark out territories for towns and cities. Thirteen years after Ewuare's death tales of Benin's splendors lured more Portuguese traders to the city gates.

## Nri Kingdom

The Kingdom of Nri (Igbo: *Oràéze Nri*) (948–1911) was the West African medieval state of the Nri-Igbo, a subgroup of the Igbo people. The Kingdom of Nri was unusual in the history of world government in that its leader exercised no military power over his subjects. The kingdom existed as a sphere of religious and political influence over a third of Igboland, and was administered by a priest-king called the eze Nri. The eze Nri managed trade and diplomacy on behalf of the Igbo people, and possessed divine authority in religious matters. One of the better-known remnants of the Nri civilization is its art, as manifested in the Igbo Ukwu bronze items.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Nri hegemony in Igboland may go back as far as the 9th century, and royal burials have been unearthed dating to at least the 10th century. Eri, the god-like founder of Nri, is believed to have settled the region around 948AD, with other related Igbo cultures following after in the 13th century. The first *eze Nri* (King of Nri), Ifikuánim, follows directly after him. According to Igbo oral tradition, his reign started in 1043. At least one historian puts Ifikuánim's reign much later, around 1225 AD.

In 1911, the names of 19 *eze Nri* were recorded, but the list is not easily converted into chronological terms because of long interregnums between installations. Tradition held that at least seven years would pass upon the death of the *eze Nri* before a successor could be determined; the interregnum served as a period of divination of signs from the deceased *eze Nri*, who would communicate his choice of successor from beyond the grave in the seven or more years ensuing upon his death. Regardless of the actual date, this period marks the beginning of Nri kingship as a centralized institution.